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ABSTRACT

This report explores the impact, through themes that emerged in interviews with 59 participating adolescents, of the Mentor/Advisor Program on students with or at risk of emotional disturbance. The Mentor/Advisor Program is implemented as part of the existing regular education high school curriculum and is designed to promote resiliency and school success among high school students, particularly those with emotional and behavioral challenges. This is accomplished through opportunities for building relationships, leadership and problem-solving skills, and community engagement. The main components of the project include: (1) heterogeneous groups of 6-8 students (those with and without emotional and behavioral problems) meet with their mentor throughout the school year for approximately one hour 2 to 3 times per week; (2) community service learning projects that meet the needs of the community; (3) Individualized Learning Plans; and (4) family and community involvement. Participating adolescents indicated that the mentor groups gave them a chance to be accepted and a sense of belonging not based on traditional social groups. Students also indicated that one of the key reasons they liked the mentorship class was the opportunity for student leadership. The community service learning was consistently noted by students as one of their favorite aspects of the program. (CR)

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Students Speak Out: Preliminary Qualitative Findings of a Mentor/Advisor Project

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Introduction

The Mentor/Advisor Program was initiated through a four year grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education and is implemented as part of the existing regular education high school curriculum. The purpose of this project is to promote resiliency and school success among high school students, particularly those with emotional and behavioral challenges. This is accomplished through opportunities for building relationships, leadership and problem-solving skills, and community engagement. The main components of the project include: 1) *Mentor/Advisor Groups*: Heterogeneous groups of 6-8 students (those with and without emotional and behavioral problems) meet with their mentor throughout the school year for approximately one hour 2-3 times per week. Mentors are school staff members (i.e., regular and special educators, guidance and mental health staff, etc.) who received ongoing consultation from project staff, as well as peer support. 2) *Community Service Learning Projects*: In their groups, students work together to design and implement community service learning projects that meet the needs of the community. 3) *Individualized Learning Plans*: Each student has the opportunity to select an area of personal interest (generally not available in the traditional curriculum) and develop a goal plan in that area. Often this involves being matched up with a member of the community who has similar interests and skills. 4) *Family and Community Involvement*: Events throughout the year keep families and community members informed of project activities and their involvement and input is strongly encouraged. This paper explores the impact of the program on students with or at risk of emotional disturbance through the themes that emerged in the student interviews.

Method

The data described here reflect the experiences of students who participated in the Mentor/Advisor Program at one rural high school in Vermont. Of the total number of students who enrolled in the program over the last four years, 59% (n = 61) were females and 41% (n = 42) were males. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used to evaluate the program's impact on students. Sixteen broad themes emerged from structured qualitative interviews with students, parents, and mentors. This paper focuses on the interview data primarily from students who are at-risk and three sub-themes related to their experiences with their mentor groups. Interviews were conducted at the end of each school year. Of the total student interviews (n = 59), 66% (n = 39) were repeated interviews and 34% (n = 20) were one time interviews. Of the total interviews, 61% (n = 36) were females and 39% (n = 23) were males. More in depth case studies were conducted with a selected number of students. Aspects of one case study are presented in the sidebar.

Results & Discussion

"They're There For Me"

Adolescence is a time for establishing one's own identity (Holmbeck & Undegrove, 1995). Yet, the clear message conveyed by the youth who were interviewed is that they would also like to "fit in" and be accepted by their peers. Many teens described social cliques as a means of gaining both a sense of acceptance and an identity defined by the group. However, many of these cliques seemed to break

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The names of all students have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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Leo's Story

At the age of 5 years, Leo and his two younger brothers were removed from their home and placed in foster care, as a result of neglect issues. Initially, Leo would communicate only through violent temper tantrums and physical aggression. While these behaviors gradually subsided within the foster home, they continued to occur within the elementary and middle school environments. As a result of these behaviors, other students kept their distance from him. Despite his inquisitive mind, Leo continued to perform poorly academically and was found eligible for special education under the classification of Emotional Disturbance.

When Leo entered high school, he was encouraged to enroll in the Mentorship Program, with the hope that this might increase his opportunity to make friends and develop needed life skills. During the first four weeks of team building activities, Leo remained distant from his peers, sitting at a table on the other side of the room. However, once it was time to focus on community service learning activities, a new side of Leo emerged. He became increasingly active in the process of generating ideas for projects and was one of the most reliable group members regarding follow through and participation in projects. Within a few months, he was sitting at the same table as his classmates and was demonstrating considerable problem-solving skills. Leo's classmates showed increased respect for him. As described by his mentor, "Leo's very quiet, but he goes with the flow. He gets along well with everyone. He doesn't make waves."

The following year, Leo was transferred to a new mentor group because his mentor took a new position. Initially, he engaged in withdrawn and disruptive behavior. Over time, Leo became more connected to the other students in the group and resumed his active participation in community service projects. By the end of the year, Leo's mentor noted, "I've seen a lot of growth in him in terms of the social aspect. . . And with the community service he just digs right in. He's really very very helpful, cooperative." This helpfulness began to generalize to other areas of his life as well, along with an overall improvement in his academic performance and peer relations. As his foster mother Jean emphasized, "Last year Leo did excellent in algebra—straight As all year. He was helping the other kids in algebra. Prior to this, he would never have done it never. And I think it's been the Mentorship class that has helped him to grow this much." Leo's academic performance and behavior improved to such an extent that he was found ineligible for special education, even though services were maintained through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Paralleling Leo's more active participation with mentorship activities was his increased involvement with his biological parents. For example, he asked his parents to take pictures and videos of his participation in project activities. This year, for his Independent Project, Leo chose to interview his grandfather about his history.

Leo is now reaching out to help others and is a positive contributing force within his community. When asked to reflect on his participation in the community, Leo responded, "It's helping out your community so that if someone else lives there, they would, like, know how safe, and how everybody helps, like, other people."

down according to class lines (i.e., "preppy," "scrubbers"), creating an unspoken caste system within the school and breeding fear of the unfamiliar. One student reported, "It's kind of like any other school. The preppy group. The rough crowd. No one knows anything about each other and so they don't like each other."

Students indicated that their mentor group, composed of approximately six to eight students with one adult mentor, gave them a chance to be accepted and a sense of belonging not based on traditional social groups. According to Cecilia, "I learned I have more friends than I thought I did. If I ever need anyone to talk to, they're there for me." This was particularly pertinent for students who tended to have few, if any, friends. When Toni was asked what school would be like without mentorship class, she said, "I would be alone. I mean I would have a life but it wouldn't really be complete without the class." For many youth, mentorship also provided an opportunity to get to know students they would generally avoid because of perceived differences. As emphasized by Kate, "I've met four new people that have become my friends that I wouldn't have ever talked to."

"We Run It"

The majority of students interviewed felt that it was important to have a voice in decisions that affected them, yet they also felt that their input was not usually solicited by adults. Students indicated that one of the key reasons they liked the mentorship class was the opportunity for student leadership. As stated by Melany, "We run it, basically the kids do…I like it better than any of my classes…I always look forward to that class." Students discussed how the opportunity to run their own group in a collaborative manner taught them valuable skills in group decision-making and shared leadership. When Cindy was asked how the class affected her sense of leadership, she replied, "Leadership? I think it's more communication. Like for a leader to be a good leader, they have to be able to communicate their ideas well and, like, understand others' ideas too. And it's helped me with that a lot." For other students, mentorship has given them the confidence to speak out, when they might otherwise have shied away. According to Jim, "I have more authority now. I speak up more because of that class. Now I'm more confident about what I'm going to do."

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"Even Though We're Teenagers, We Care"

Community service learning was consistently noted by students as one of their favorite aspects of the Mentorship Project. Youth discussed how the opportunity to help others gave them an increased awareness and sensitivity to the needs of others. This sentiment is described by Sharon, who commented, "That's why I did the mentor group. It gets people more in tune with what life is really like. If you go to a homeless shelter or to an elderly home, you actually see what it's like in the real world." For some students, their efforts served to counter what they viewed as a negative reputation of youth. As stated by Mary, "I liked working on community projects, helping others, feeling that even though we're teenagers, we care."

Numerous students also described how their involvement in community service learning projects positively affected their self-confidence and self-esteem. Many youth discussed their pride in helping their community and their sense of accomplishment, particularly in overcoming their own fears. Sue, a shy and reserved student reported, "I'm proud that I've accomplished something to help my community. I feel everyone should do something once in their lives to help everyone around them. It helped draw me out of my shell a little." This sense of accomplishment was particularly important for those students who have experienced academic failure in their more traditional classes. For some students, the sense of personal success generalized to their performance in other areas of their life. This was exemplified in the comments by Sean, "My attitude's gotten a lot better since the mentorship class. The fact that we go out and do community service, do nice things for other people. I feel better about myself. I feel like a nicer person. When you feel like a nicer person, you pay more attention in class."

Implications

These initial findings support the implementation of this group mentoring model within a regular high school environment. In particular, they suggest that the Mentorship Project has had a positive impact on many "at risk" students, particularly with respect to relationship building, increased sense of control, and positive self-concept. In support of these findings, it should be noted that the local school district has continued the program through local funding now that the federal grant funding has come to an end.

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